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INSIDE WASHINGTON

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Turncoat puts CIA on the spot

THE amazing case of Edward Howard, the CIA turncoat who exposed one of America's most prized "moles" to the KGB, has intensified a simmering battle between the agency and members of Congress over improving U.S. counter-intelligence capabilities.

Howard, who escaped an FBI dragnet in New Mexico earlier this month and is believed to be behind the Iron curtain, once was the case officer of Soviet military electronics whiz A.G. Tolkachev — the agency's most prized secret agent — who was executed last summer.

Howard was sent to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow under "deep cover" despite polygraph tests revealing a history of emotional troubles and drug abuse — marking him as a prime target for blackmail and recruitment by the KGB.

When he was fired in 1984, the CIA failed to notify the FBI — which has jurisdiction in counter-intelligence cases in the U.S. — that Howard had bragged to colleagues about passing secret information to the Soviets.

The case highlights a glaring weakness in the multibillion-dollar intelligence industry. In recent months, a number of respected and trusted operatives have been caught selling national security secrets to the Soviets.

It is well known in the intelligence world that the CIA's counter-intelligence abilities — as well as those of other government services — were decimated in the '70s by scandals surrounding James Angleton and his massive domestic spying operation.

Ironically, it was Congress and the investigation by the Church Committee that brought down Angleton and his once-powerful counter-intelligence section.

Congress wants to revive that section while the CIA bureaucracy, eager to protect its image, is trying to block the move.

"That's one of the sad legacies of the Church Committee," Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.), said in a telephone interview last week.

Wallop, one of Congress' leading intelligence experts, said that over the past four years the Senate Intelligence Committee — backed by CIA director William Casey — has sought to strengthen the agency's methods for weeding out potential spies and rogue agents.

Wallop disclosed that, among other remedies, the CIA has attempted to set up a full-time counter-intelligence chief and staff — rather than the present informal and temporary arrangement.

The senator also said he hoped for legislation to establish a formal procedure under which the CIA and FBI would share information on potential double agents.

"It is amazing to think that there is no such procedure right now. They don't share their files with each other. There's no cross-referencing. There's no computer interfacing," Wallop said.

Despite Wallop's efforts, the CIA has refused to endorse these steps — especially the creation of a new James Angleton.

"They've got a well-entrenched bureaucracy over there," Wallop said.

"They don't want someone looking over their shoulders and questioning the judgment and loyalty of the people who have spent their careers at the CIA."

The CIA, as usual, isn't commenting.

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